

Dustin Long, *Virginian Pilot*

A Minnesota congresswoman has introduced an amendment to ban the military from spending money to sponsor NASCAR race cars through Sept. 30, end of this fiscal year. Rep. Betty McCollum, a Democrat whose district includes St. Paul, introduced the amendment Monday to keep any military branch from sponsoring "NASCAR race cars."

The Army sponsors Ryan Newman, the National Guard sponsors Dale Earnhardt Jr. and the Air Force sponsors AJ Allmendinger in the Sprint Cup Series, the highest level in NASCAR.

Military officials have said in the past that sponsoring cars helps with recruitment, but Bill Harper, McCollum's chief of staff, doesn't buy that.

"I would challenge the Pentagon to give me one example of someone today in Iraq or Afghanistan who saw the Go Army car going around the race track and that's why they joined the Army," Harper said this morning. "It may be the reason why they go to Home Depot, but not necessarily Afghanistan." NASCAR spokesman Ramsey Poston countered: "NASCAR fans are the kind of people who fight America's wars, which would put into question the wisdom of banning the military's ability to reach out to them."

Poston said NASCAR research shows that one in three servicemen or women is a NASCAR fan and that one in five either serves now or has served in the military.

Harper noted that there is nothing in the amendment that would prohibit military branches from going to NASCAR races to recruit by setting up booths and other such things.

How significant is this in terms of money saved? As an example, in 2009 the Army paid \$11.6 million to sponsor Newman's car. Though the amount spent is miniscule compared with a federal budget approaching \$4 trillion, Harper said it's about priorities.

"We're in a fiscal crisis. There's an amendment on the floor to eliminate all funding for homeless veterans. On one hand we're eliminating assistance to men and women who served our

country, ... and on the other hand we're paying for race cars. That doesn't make sense," Harper said. "The question is, why are taxpayer dollars being used to sponsor NASCAR race cars? We've got two wars going on. Can we afford it? This is not an attack on NASCAR. There are a lot of private sector businesses that support NASCAR. The Pentagon is in the war-fighting business and not the race business."

Both the House and Senate are expected to pass separate bills. If they then emerge from a House-Senate conference committee as a passed bill, it would go to the president.

Harper conceded there is a long way to go before this amendment could become law. "The question is going to be what do we want to invest our precious tax dollars in as Americans."